DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 861 CS 201 920

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TITLE The Students' Right to Their Own Language--Or the Students' Right to Language Itself: A Challenge.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, Missouri, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS American English; Composition (Literary); *Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that many English teachers are not prepared to be language teachers and are unwilling and unready to shift their educational focus from literature to language, a shift which is necessary in light of students' needs today. Numerous suggestions are made for improving language courses: design courses that offer a strong background in the nature of language as well as in aspects of traditional language tools; design courses which teach the appropriateness of language in given situations and with given audiences; continue to teach the history of American English; teach logic and organization in language; educate or reeducate teachers in the nature of language; and continue to teach poetry, drama, fiction, media, and courses in literary heritage in the context of the artistic use of language. (TS)

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THE STUDENTS' RIGHT TO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE--OR THE STUDENTS' RIGHT TO LANGUAGE ITSELF: A CHALLENGE

Sister Mary Louise Vandover

Certainly the Conference on College Composition and Communication resolution on the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" has provoked lively controversy in the faculty room as well as in curriculum committee meetings and at PTA sessions. The cause of this controversy is understandable; it lies in the context in which we operate: "English" teachers primarily prepared to teach the appreciation and analysis of literature; a public--parents, employers, college professors and other teachers--conditioned to expect a certain level of competency in "Standard American English" or "Edited American English" as the end product of twelve years of education; and high school graduates unable to adequately meet the expectations of their professors, their employers, and, in many cases, their families.

Both the resolution and the background statement offer a challenge to the high school teacher and to the entire education profession: the linguistic principles are valid from the viewpoint of the language teacher; the social values expressed in the concern for human dignity underlying the statements on minority dialects are morally valid; but the demands and expectations of the general public and the past emphasis of teacher preparation create an impasse.

As the situation now stands, the implications of the resolution and the background statement may be impractical and perhaps impossible

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to carry out. Many "English" teachers are not prepared to be language teachers; many "English" teachers are not prepared to teach dialects other than their own; many "English" teachers are not willing and ready to shift their educational focus from literature to language. Even if all the masters of propaganda and doublespeak could be organized to undertake a massive reeducation program for the general public, past experience in other areas has shown that any change would come slowly--very slowly, if at all; in the meantime, class after class would grind slowly through the diploma mill.

The victims of this situation are the students themselves. At the present, they are frustrated by seemingly irrelevant courses and by language habits which limit their economic potential and social mobility. The students face a linguistically sophisticated future world in which the language barriers formerly maintained by social, cultural, and geographic boundaries will give way to electronically-instant exchange that knows no barriers. Then our students will be expected to cope with life in terms of the language shaped by that world. They will be expected not only to deal with basic needs but also to continue the very personal act of giving artistic expression to the deepest human values, emotions, and conflicts through the new language. How effectively they will be able to do this depends to some extent on us and on what we are now doing in our classrooms. Unless we reexamine our educational objectives in the light of future needs as well as present realities, we may perpetuate the impasse and frustrate the future development of our students.

Rather than argue about the appropriateness of a given dialect, the use of the comma, the correction of Johnny's spelling and the regional

accents of his parents (which, by the way, "keep us from doing our job"), we should design courses that offer a sound background in the nature of language--non-verbal language as well as verbal, including body language and various media "grammars" as well as aspects of verbal language now in the classroom: dialects, phonology, morphology, syntax, grammar, usage, semantics, lexicography. We should examine the methods currently in use in foreign language education to see which are applicable to the teaching of various aspects of American English and should adapt those methods to meet the needs of our students.

We should design courses which will teach the appropriateness of languages in given situations and with given audiences, enabling our students to deal with several levels and kinds of language rather than just one; we should develop courses that teach the skills necessary for students to size up their audiences in order to select the most appropriate language for the situation. It is true that, given time, all human beings should be able to make themselves understood; however, the circumstances around each act of information-exchange limit the opportunity to clarify meaning, and individuals live for generations with the consequences of misunderstanding. Not all dialects of American English and not all forms of non-verbal language are easily understood. The tensions between husbands and wives, parents and children, between racial and social groups, and between nations attest to that. Our language courses should teach skills for correcting the misunderstandings that result from ineffective language.

We should continue to teach the history of American English, tracing it back to its Anglo-Saxon roots and including all the ethnic contributions which have given it diversity and flexibility. We should teach logic and organization since verbal language is a limited medium by which we exchange

information. We should continue to teach poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction, film, media, and courses in literary heritages; but we should do this in the context of the artistic use of language and form to give expression to ideas and values. From Chaucer to Niki Giovanni, from Greek and Roman mythology to Native American legends and myths, the range and variety of this art can give students an idea of the flexibility and diversity of form as a framework for meaning, as an expression of values, and as a reflection of one facet of our diverse and rich human experience.

In order to stress language, it will be necessary to educate or reeducate many teachers in the principles discussed in the background statement to the resolution on the "Students' Right to Their Own Language." It will be necessary to reeducate parents and the general public on the nature of language itself. The bibliography at the end of the statement provides a beginning, but this alone is not sufficient. Real life experience, personal contact with diverse forms of language, the findings from other disciplines such as psychology and sociology are essential for a complete and effective program.

It is evident that many of us, as professionals, find ourselves in disagreement with some implications of this resolution. However, if we carefully and objectively read and reflect on the background statement, we may recognize it as a challenge to reexamine and perhaps restructure our efforts in the classroom.

The student's language is a basic part of his self-identity. He does have a right to it; however, it is also the only means by which he can reach out to another person. Language is far more complex than print and verbal speech alone. It is far too important to deal with in a careless or haphazard way. We know Standard American English, the EAE

of the background statement, is a basic tool and a key to acceptance in American society; that it is, in many ways, an inadequate tool we also know. Nevertheless, it is a tool to which every student has a right, and it is a part of a more fundamental and versatile instrument, language itself. The student does have a right not only to his own language but also to language in its fullest sense and in its many forms. As teachers, we have an obligation to help the student arrive at his fullest possible comptency in language; this is the challenge.